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ABSTRACT

Findings are reported from a 50-state survey of state assessment and accountability systems conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education in 2000. A four-step process was used to collect and verify data for the preparation of state profiles. Nine common layers of accountability have been identified: (1) a statewide system of measurement; (2) performance reporting; (3) achievement targets or goals; (4) categories of success; (5) school improvement planning requirements; (6) technical assistance and support; (7) rewards; (8) sanctions; and (9) school takeover, reconstitution, or closure. This analysis, which is an expansion of work done by S. Fuhrman and others, explores state policies related to these levels, focusing on school-level planning, the use of performance targets, categories or levels of accreditation, public reporting, and consequences for performance. Each state has taken from some or all of these layers to build its system of accountability. Regardless of the degree to which states hold schools accountable, it appears that U.S. schools will be left to use the limited funds they have to improve assessment scores to the best of their ability. The reform inferno will remain the hot topic it is in education for the foreseeable future. (SLD)

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America's Reform Inferno: The Nine Layers of Accountability

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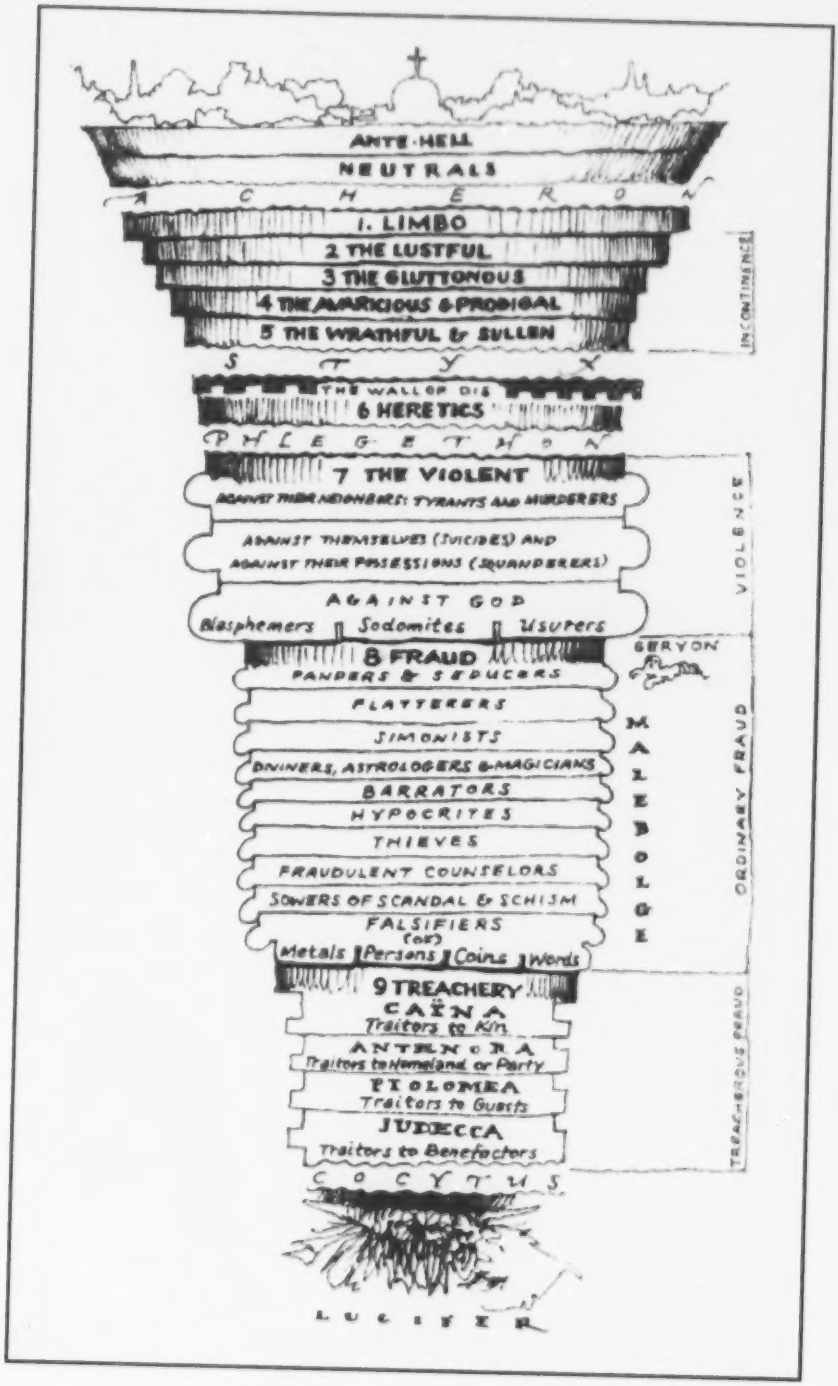

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the push for standards-based reform has become a national movement for school accountability. This movement has swept across the United States in the form of statewide assessment systems, public reporting and school-level accountability based on performance outcomes. The majority of the states have, in fact, developed systems of accountability that not only test students and report test scores, but also use consequences such as rewards, sanctions and assistance as incentives to push schools toward high achievement on state assessments. In looking across all 50 states, it is evident that 50 variations on the theme of standards-based reform are being proposed and implemented. Common characteristics can also be seen, however, as we develop a picture of how the states have individually developed these variations on a national movement.

In looking more specifically at these new approaches in an effort to unwrap the accountability reform strategies used across the states, nine common "layers of accountability" can be identified:

1. A Statewide System of Measurement
2. Performance Reporting
3. Achievement Targets or Goals
4. Categories of Success
5. School Improvement Planning Requirements
6. Technical Assistance and Support
7. Rewards
8. Sanctions, and
9. School Takeover, Reconstitution or Closure.

Some of these layers are found in all of the states, others in just a portion. They do, however, represent the range of indicators, incentives and consequences that the states have developed to push schools and students toward higher achievement.

This analysis of the state's accountability systems is an expansion on the work done by Susan Fuhrman and others in this area. In Fuhrman's policy brief, *The New Accountability*, she outlined seven factors involved in many of the states' developing systems of accountability. The factors explored in her analysis included: 1) a focus on student performance rather than compliance to regulations; 2) schools as the unit of improvement; 3) continuous improvement strategies involving school-level planning around specific performance targets; 4) new approaches to classroom inspection; 5) categories or levels of accreditation; 6) public reporting of school-level test scores; and 7) consequences attached to performance levels. Building on these seven factors and using current data from all of the states, this analysis will further explore state policies in the areas of school-level planning, the use of performance targets, categories or levels of accreditation, public reporting and consequences for performance. This paper also draws heavily from the CPRE report, *Assessment and Accountability Systems in the 50 States:*

1999-2000, but places the states in a revised framework for looking only at accountability systems for institutions, specifically schools and districts.

Indeed, this report will not include a discussion of high stakes accountability for students, a topic worthy of its own paper, but will instead focus on systems of institutional assessment and accountability for schools and districts. It is also important to make clear that this analysis is based on statewide systems of accountability for all schools and not those systems that have been designed only for Title I schools. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to use current research on all 50 states to provide a way to think about the states and how many layers of accountability they have included in their own systems. The paper will provide state trends with regard to what aspects of accountability are commonly being implemented and the specifics of how the states have chosen to develop these layers within their individual systems.

The National Context

During the final decade of the last millennium, the Clinton administration worked to implement the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994. This legislation created significant changes in Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the largest federal program designed to support schools that primarily educate poor children. Under the IASA, states have been expected to establish challenging content and performance standards, implement assessments that measure students' performance against these standards and hold schools and school systems accountable for the achievement of all students. Specifically, Title I has required that states:

- Establish challenging content and performance standards in at least reading and mathematics;

- Develop or adopt high quality annual assessments in reading and mathematics that measure the learning of students served by Title I, are based on the state's content and performance standards and assess a sample of students in as few as one grade in each of three grade intervals (grades 3-5, grades 6-9, grades 10-12);

- Describe two levels of high performance on these assessments (proficient and advanced) that determine how well children are mastering the material in the state content standards and describe a third level of performance (partially proficient) to provide complete information about the progress of the lower performing children toward achieving to the proficient and advanced levels of performance; and

- Define and establish criteria for measuring "adequate yearly progress" for Title I schools and districts including at least the state assessment and potentially other measures, such as attendance and dropout rates.

Under these provisions, the federal government has required local school districts to identify for school improvement any school that has not made adequate yearly progress for two consecutive school years and states to identify for improvement any district that

has failed to make adequate progress toward meeting the state's performance standards for two consecutive years. It has also been expected that states create systems of assessment and accountability in which *all* schools, not just those funded by Title I, be held to the same set of performance standards and consequences.

As the first American President of the new decade and the next millennium, George W. Bush helped to cement this focus on accountability as the continuing cornerstone of our national education policy within days of starting his new administration by putting forth his education plan, "No Child Left Behind." Expanding on what has already become a common strategy of assessing student progress and holding schools accountable for achievement, President Bush called for comparable students assessments every year in grades three through eight, consequences for schools that fail to educate students and rewards for schools that narrow the achievement gap and improve overall student achievement.

Although this policy focus on accountability has become common and comfortable among many leading politicians and policy makers, many teachers and parents have called for an end to policies requiring the development of curriculum focused only on the state assessment. Others have lobbied state departments of education to create assessments aligned with the standards before holding schools accountable for covering those standards. Regardless of the positions held on such questions of education reform, there is no doubt that school accountability has become the hot topic in America's education reform inferno, and "leaving no child behind" its catch phrase.

Methodology

The findings reported here are drawn from a 50 state survey of state assessment and accountability systems conducted by the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) between February and June 2000. We focused our data collection on state policies that were in place during the 1999-2000 school year. We used a four-step process to collect and verify our data. First, we collected and analyzed extant data from secondary sources: weekly and special issues of Education Week such as *Quality Counts* (1999, 2000), the Council of Chief State School Officers (2000), the American Federation of Teachers (1998, 1999), and state department of education web sites. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with the directors of assessment, accountability and Title I programs in each of the states to confirm, clarify and update information collected from written sources. We also used these interviews to identify proposed changes in state policies. These interviews were often supplemented by materials sent by the respondents. The third step entailed writing an extensive profile on each state that included descriptive information on the state's assessment, inclusion, reporting, accountability, assistance and Title I policies and practices. Finally, we asked state respondents to verify the written profiles, and we incorporated suggested changes and corrections into the final profiles. The state profiles are available on the CPRE website: www.upenn.edu/gse/cpre.

The First Layer: A Statewide System of Measurement

In order to hold schools accountable for output as opposed to the more traditional input or process measures, states must first develop or adopt an instrument(s) to be used as the primary or sole criteria. Under the requirements outlined under the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, the criteria used for defining school progress must include at least a state assessment. In working to fulfill this requirement and/or similar provisions included in individual state legislation, many states have developed an assessment system testing students within the grade ranges outlined under the current Title I legislation. Although other states such as Kentucky and Maryland had already embarked on the journey of standards-based reform by creating assessment systems, many others did not have assessments in place that could hold schools accountable for teaching students the information covered by the state standards within the grades specified when the IASA was first being implemented.

According to our research, forty-eight states use a statewide assessment as the principal indicator of school performance. These states vary with regard to the grades tested, however. During the 1999-2000 academic year, twelve states tested students in the same subject areas in consecutive grades. A few more states test in every grade, but in differing subject areas and/or using different tests. For example, Kentucky's Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) tests reading, writing and science in grades four and seven, and mathematics and social studies in grades 5 and 8. The assessment of these subjects is then spread across the high school years: reading (10), mathematics, science and social studies (11) and writing (12). Students in grades not included in CATS (3, 6 and 9) are administered the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) in reading and mathematics. Louisiana and Maryland test students every year from grades 3-9 in the same subjects, but use different assessments. Louisiana, for example, tests students in grades 3, 5, 6 and 7 with the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), in grades 4 and 8 with the criterion-referenced Louisiana Educational Assessment Program for the 21st Century (LEAP 21), and in grade 9 with the Iowa Tests of Educational Development (ITED). Maryland administers its performance-based assessment, Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP), in grades 3, 5 and 8, and the CTBS in the alternating grades of 2, 4, and 6.

As stated previously, the IASA also requires states to test students during one point in at least three grade spans: grades 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12. However, states assess students considerably more often, with some states testing students in almost every grade. The states fell into one of three categories in 1999-2000:

- They test students in a single grade per subject at each of three levels;
- They test consecutive grades between grades 2 or 3 and at least grade 8 in the same subject areas using the same assessment; or
- They test consecutive grades between grades 2 or 3 and 8 in different subjects and/or using multiple assessments.

The majority of the states test students at specific points in each of the three grade spans, similar to the federal requirements. Maine, Oregon and Michigan provide examples of such states. In Maine, students are tested only in grades 3, 8 and 11. In Oregon, students in grades 3, 5, 8 and 10 participate in the state assessment. The Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) tests reading and mathematics in grades 4 and 7 and writing, social studies and science in grades 5 and 8, while the High School Proficiency Test assesses all five subjects in grade 11.

States must also decide what sort of assessment(s) will be used to measure student performance. Seventeen states administer only criterion-referenced tests and two states (Montana and South Dakota) use only norm-referenced tests in their state assessment systems. The remaining 29 states with statewide assessment systems administer a combination of criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests.

Although developing a state assessment system is critical to any statewide system of accountability, a number of states include two other components to measure student output: local assessments and non-cognitive measures. The two states without statewide assessment systems (Iowa and Nebraska) require local districts to assess students in particular subjects and in specific grade spans with a test of it's choosing. Nebraska, however, will implement a statewide writing test in the spring of 2001. Three other states (Maine, Colorado and Vermont) have taken steps to incorporate local assessment results into their student or school accountability measures.[1] Finally, several states require districts to assess early literacy skills as a way of identifying students who need help in learning reading in the primary grades.

In addition to state and local assessment systems, states often collect measures of student performance beyond tested achievement. Local report cards in more than half of the states include attendance rates or average daily attendance (39), dropout rates (37), graduation rates (27) and enrollment (38), while over a fifth of the states include student mobility (11), promotion and/or retention rates (12). Information on Advanced Placement course-taking and test scores and average SAT or ACT scores are reported in about half of the states. Some states have gone a step further and included such non-cognitive measures as a part of the criteria to calculate a school's category of success.

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[1] To comply with their state's Basic Literacy Act, Colorado school districts must use evidence from "individual reading assessments" as well as the state assessment to determine the reading proficiency of third graders. Maine gives districts the option of using a new portfolio assessment system, the Maine Assessment Portfolio (MAP), to supplement information generated by the Maine Educational Assessment (MEA). While Vermont's new accountability system gives predominant weight to its state assessments, schools are encouraged to use other assessments and they may select one or more local assessment for accountability purposes if approved by the State Board of Education. The state will determine the individual and combined maximum weight of the local assessments (relative to the state assessments) in the accountability system. Local assessments could count for up to 30 percent of a district's accountability measure.

Performance Reporting of Student Measurement

Performance reporting of assessment results and other data is the second layer of accountability and allows the public to become aware of how a school and its students are achieving based on test scores and other measures. The public can then use this information to demand improvements in their schools, or possibly to choose alternate schools for their children. All fifty states currently produce and/or require local school districts to produce and disseminate district and/or school report cards. School report cards are prepared in 40 of these states (CCSSO, 2000). The report cards include, at a minimum, student performance on state and/or local assessments. States that have established student performance levels (i.e. advanced, proficient, basic, below basic) generally report the percentage of students scoring at each of these levels. If the state assessment is norm-referenced or includes a norm-referenced component, scores are also commonly reported as scale scores or by the national percentile ranking. Assessment scores are further disaggregated by grade and subject, and to a lesser extent by other demographic categories. States that have created categories of performance for schools and/or districts also report that information on a school or district report card.

Thirteen states use public reporting as their primary accountability mechanism. In most of these states, districts must administer and report the results of a statewide assessment. The two states without statewide assessment systems require districts to administer tests of their choosing. Districts must provide performance reports to their communities that include student achievement and possibly other measures of student performance. In all these cases, states do not rank or rate school or district performance, nor do they identify low-performing schools. These tasks are left to the public and to local educators.

Three of the states that rely on public reporting (Alaska, Georgia, and Hawaii) are in the process of developing school-based accountability systems that are supposed to go into effect in 2001-2002 or later. Policymakers in other states, such as New Hampshire and Minnesota, have proposed such systems, but have not gained the political support necessary to gain passage of accountability systems in their state legislatures. However, policy officials in other states would assert that providing the public with assessment results and other data provide a sufficient system with which to hold schools accountable for performance and let parents decide how best to address the needs of schools in which students are performing below standard.

Indeed, some members of the educational community point to performance reporting as an important part of any state accountability system and make the argument that the disclosure of assessment results has a significant impact on schools, districts and communities. In a piece broadcast on National Public Radio, a teacher recounted an explanation he provided to his class about the importance of the public reporting of assessment scores:

"The (writing) scores are published in the paper. If our scores aren't good then people will think our schools aren't good and they will not want to move here, and that will make the real estate people mad, and they will yell at the school board, who will yell at the superintendent, who will yell at the principal, who will yell at me." [2]

To be sure, many state policy makers, school administrators, teachers and parents would argue that public reporting plays an extremely influential role in holding schools accountable for their performance.

Achievement Targets or Goals: Setting the Standard

Title I calls for states to establish at least three levels of student performance on state assessments (advanced, proficient, and partially proficient) to show how well students are mastering the material outlined in state content standards. Nearly all of the states with statewide assessments have student performance levels in place for the 2000-2001 school year. A few states that use norm-referenced tests had not developed performance standards for these assessments, reporting results only by national percentile rank (NPR). Although all of the states with statewide assessment systems require the public dissemination of assessment results and other data, fewer states have taken the next step by setting performance targets or goals for schools and districts in the state. There is a wide variation in school performance goals across the states. State targets appear to vary along three dimensions:

1. the expected level of student performance (e.g., basic, proficient);
2. the percentage of students schools must get to these standards; and
3. the length of time schools are given to meet their goal.

While in most states a certain percentage of students in each school are expected to have achieved at the "proficient" level, what proficiency means across these states varies considerably. States also differ in the percentage of students that schools are expected to bring up to the basic or proficient standard, with some expecting almost all students to reach proficiency, others only half. Finally, states set different timelines for meeting these performance goals. In many states each school must have a required percentage of students scoring at the proficient level each year to be considered successful. In others, such as Vermont and Kentucky, schools have between five and twenty years to get a specified percentage of students to score at the proficient level. Still other states do not specify target dates for meeting standards, but use annual progress targets as an implicit timeline for moving schools toward the state's performance goals. California, for example, has set an interim goal for its Academic Performance Indicator of 800. The state assigns each school an Annual Growth Target (of at least five percent) based on the distance between its current performance and the state goal.

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[2] A report by Daniel Ferry on *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, (March 3, 2000).

Categories of Success: The Fourth Layer

As with student performance levels, states differ in the number of categories they create and the terminology they use to describe different levels of performance based on the performance goals or targets that have been set. The following are common models of describing school performance:

- Rating the schools using accreditation or performance categories
- Grading the schools, and
- Creating index measurements.

How a school falls in these and similar categories of school performance are reported on public performance reports as a way to place schools into defined categories of success.

Rating schools using levels or accreditation ratings is a very common method of placing schools and/or districts into categories of success. Michigan, for example, uses accreditation terminology to classify its schools: a school receives "summary" accreditation if at least two-thirds of its students score at the highest performance level on all of the state assessments, and an "interim" accreditation if more than half of its students meet this goal on at least one assessment. Massachusetts has six performance categories (very high to critically low) and four improvement categories.

America's Reform Inferno:
The Nine Layers of Accountability

A Statewide System of Measurement

Performance Reporting of Student Measurement

Achievement Targets or Goals

Categories of Success

School Improvement Planning

Technical Assistance and Support Systems

Rewards for Success

Sanctions for Failure

School Takeover, Reconstitution or Closure

The use of grades to define school achievement levels has been highly publicized in Florida, a state which assigns letter grades (A, B, C, D, and F) to its five performance categories that reflect the percentage of students scoring at or above Level 2 (minimum criteria) or Level 3 (higher criteria) on the state assessment. In Colorado, the state legislature recently approved a new system to assign letter grades to schools based on state test results using a new system of state report cards. The first reports cards will be released on August 15, 2001. Each public school will receive an academic performance letter grade based on all state assessment scores. Schools that receive C, D, or F will also get an academic improvement letter grade based on improvement measured by the percentage of one standard deviation over the previous year's CSAP scores.

A and B schools will be given an academic improvement rating instead of a letter grade to indicate whether they have made significant improvement, decline or significant decline in school performance.

Other states, such as California, Kentucky, Maryland and Vermont, assign composite index numbers to schools that show their position relative to a state goal. A School Performance Index of 100 in Maryland or Academic Performance Index of 800 in California, for example, means that the school has met all of the states' standards. Under the new accountability system in Vermont, each school is notified of its Change Index Growth Target, defined as the difference between the school's Baseline Index and the State Board's goal of 500 on the performance level point scale, divided by the number of accountability cycles remaining through school year 2007-2008.

School Improvement Planning as an Initial Consequence

Once the state has developed an assessment system, created a system of public performance reporting, defined what it means to be a successful school and created categories of success, policymakers in the state must decide whether to take the next step: assign consequences to schools and/or districts that are defined as unsuccessful. An initial consequence common in states is the required development of a school improvement plan. These plans typically must address school weaknesses identified by low assessment scores and propose strategies to improve those scores.

In many states, however, the development of an improvement or action plan is required regardless of a school or district's level of achievement. In North Carolina, for example, all schools, regardless of its accountability status, must have a school improvement plan in place under the state's ABCs of Public Education. Similarly in Kentucky and Maryland, schools work with data on an annual basis as a part of the state required planning programs. In both cases, the state department of education has developed resource materials to assist schools in the development of such plans.

In addition, some states without statewide performance-based accountability systems outside of performance reporting require schools or districts to create plans to address how to improve student achievement based on assessment data. For instance, although the state departments of education in Arizona, Hawaii and Maine do not identify non-Title I schools as in need of improvement, all of the schools in these states must develop school improvement plans based on assessment data, regardless of their level of achievement. The accountability system in Kansas is based on locally-developed priorities, but each school must outline these priorities in a school improvement plan as a part of the state's Quality Performance Accreditation process in which the state requires the "analysis and interpretation of data."

In other states, such as Illinois, Indiana, Missouri and Rhode Island, school improvement planning has become a central focus of the state accountability system:

- The Quality Assurance and Improvement Planning process in Illinois lists school improvement planning as its first component. The process also calls on schools to conduct an internal review calling educators, parents and the school community to conduct a "rigorous self-analysis" in which participants "reflect on existing school policies and practices."

- The Performance-Based Accreditation system in Indiana is based on three criteria: legal standards, meeting expected performance levels and developing a school improvement plan.

- The main vehicle of accountability in Missouri is the Missouri School Improvement Program (MSIP), requiring districts to prepare comprehensive school improvement plans to detail how the district will adhere to MSIP standards.

- Rhode Island's School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) program is perhaps the most wide ranging process of school analysis and planning, including self study, a school improvement plan, school visits, the development of a compact for learning and a school report night in which parents and community members hear from school officials on how well the school is doing and what the plans are to improve student achievement results.

However, the development of a school improvement or action plan or the revision of an existing plan has become an initial consequence for schools identified as low performing in a number of states. Under the new accountability system in Delaware, schools and districts that have been listed as on "accreditation watch" must develop an improvement plan to be approved by the local board of education. In Louisiana, although all schools were required to write school improvement plans by May of 1998, those schools falling into the category of "academically unacceptable" and placed in the first level of corrective action are required to review and either revise or completely rewrite their plans. Similarly, Ohio law requires any district designated as "continuous improvement, academic watch or academic emergency" to develop a three year continuous improvement plan that must include an analysis of why the district has not met certain state standards, strategies the district will use to improve its performance and resources the district will allocate to address the problems identified. In many cases, the state will provide support in the development of such plans as part of an assistance program for low performing schools.

Technical Assistance and Support Systems

Indeed, the next phase or layer of accountability within many state systems includes the technical assistance and support programs that states provide for schools that have been identified as low performing by being designated in a category of limited success. States offer a variety of assistance to low-performing schools. The mix and levels of service provided to schools vary across states and districts. However, in looking across the states four common kinds of assistance can be identified:

Support in school improvement or corrective action planning: State departments of education often provide needs assessments, on-site evaluations, assistance and training in data analysis and other forms of technical assistance to schools and districts on how to write or revise school improvement plans that identify weaknesses in student performance and strategies to improve achievement. Rhode Island's School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT) initiative supports self-study, the development of a school improvement plan, school visits and the development of a "Compact for Learning" that specifies what the district and the department will do to build the capacity of the school.

Financial assistance for low performing schools: Some states offer additional funding for the school improvement planning process and other school improvement initiatives. California, for example, has allocated nearly $200 million in the last two years to support the development of school action plans in over 800 schools. Each school receives a $50,000 grant that must be matched by local funds. Schools must hire external evaluators to coordinate the plan's development, and these action plans also act as funding applications for state implementation grants. Kentucky's Commonwealth School Improvement Fund makes monies available to eligible schools to support teachers and administrators in the development of approaches to improve instruction or management, assist in replicating successful programs developed in other districts, encourage cooperative instructional or management approaches to specific school educational problems, and encourage teachers and administrators to conduct experimental approaches to specific educational problems. Even if states have not developed specialized funding programs for low performing schools, they may target their Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program funds or other state categorical aids to these schools.

Expert assistance in planning and instruction: Both state and local education officials or teachers are often available to provide technical assistance on best practices and other forms of staff development at the school or district site. Many states have developed a Distinguished Educator model that places an experienced and/or retired teacher(s) or administrator(s) in low performing schools. State officials are also commonly assigned to a school or region as a liaison to provide information on state standards, assessments or accountability policies.

State- or regionally-sponsored professional development: A number of states have developed professional development programs to work specifically with low performing school staff and administrators in large group settings. In some cases, state department officials provide these training sessions, while in others, regional service centers offer training. These sessions again cover topics such as improvement planning, data analysis, best practices and whole school reform.

State capacity to support such programs presents a challenge in many states, however, as they work to provide these types of assistance. This lack of human and financial resources has limited the number of schools and districts that some states have identified for assistance in order to meet their available resources. Maryland and Connecticut are

among these states that identify only their very lowest-performing schools for state assistance. Illinois policymakers recently proposed halving the number of schools designated for intervention in order to target existing state resources on the lowest performers.

Rewards for Success: The Seventh Layer

In addition to assistance programs for schools and districts, states also provide rewards and sanctions as incentives for high achievement or improved performance. According to the Education Commission of the States, twenty-four states give performance-based rewards to schools or districts. (Ziebarth, August 2000) These rewards come in two forms: monetary and non-monetary. Although monetary rewards are the more common of the two forms, a few states also have programs in which schools receive recognition for their performance-based achievements that do not include additional funding.

A number of states provide examples of programs in which the rewards include monetary incentives for performance. In Florida, for example, $15 million was appropriated by the 1999 Legislature for the Florida School Recognition Program. Up to $100 per FTE will be allocated to each qualified school. Qualified schools include those that meet the grade "A" criteria or show "significant improvement." Schools that improve by one letter grade from one year to the next, and F-graded schools that show significant improvement also qualify to receive additional funding. New Jersey has established an Academic Achievement Reward Program with $10 million awarded annually to schools that attain absolute success in or significant progress toward high student achievement as measured by the state assessment system. Schools with 90 percent of students meeting state standards receive the absolute success reward. The remaining schools are divided into five bands based on their passing rates, and the 10 percent in each band with the highest level of improvement receive the significant progress reward. A per-pupil amount is determined by dividing the number of pupils taking the test in each of the qualifying schools into the $10 million appropriation.

A few states recognize, but do not provide monetary rewards to, successful schools. Massachusetts' new Exemplary Schools Program, for example, will provide the opportunity for successful schools to share their knowledge with other schools in the state. At the end of each ratings cycle, all schools that received an overall improvement rating of having exceeded expectations, and any school that received an overall improvement rating of having met expectations and that significantly outperformed demographically similar schools in the state in absolute performance, will be eligible to apply for the program.

Sanctions for Failure: The Eighth Layer

Along with the school improvement planning and revision requirements and the technical assistance programs discussed previously, the states have developed a number of different consequences for schools and districts that are not meeting their targets for

achievement or improvement over a period of years. Examples of sanctions employed in state accountability systems include the following actions:

On-site audits or monitoring by state officials: In Nevada, if a school receives two or more consecutive designations as demonstrating need for improvement, the state department of education will establish a panel to supervise the academic improvement of the school. The panel will be responsible for reviewing the most recent improvement plan, identifying and investigating the problems and factors that contribute to the designation of the school as demonstrating need for improvement, holding a public meeting to discuss the actions that the school will need to take to improve achievement, and preparing a written report that includes an analysis of the problems and factors at the school which contributed to its designation as demonstrating need for improvement. The panel may also recommend that the state superintendent of public instruction appoint an administrator to oversee the operation of the school.

Probationary status or placement on a state's warning list: To avoid sanctions under the new accountability system in Arkansas, each school is expected to achieve annually a minimum percentage of its total possible points given for the accountability indicators within the state's three-tiered system. Failure to do so will result in the following designations: high priority status for the first year, alert status for the second year, low performing status during the third year, academic distress phase I status for the fourth year and academic distress phase II and phase III during successive years.

Suspension or loss of state accreditation status: Under Delaware's Educational Accountability Act of 1998, schools initially placed on "accreditation watch" have their accreditation status reviewed at the end of each school year subsequent to being placed in this category. A school whose performance fails to demonstrate sufficient progress after two years will become "non-accredited".

Transfer or replacement of instructional or administrative staff at the school and/or district level: In North Carolina, if a school fails to improve student performance after services have been provided by the state assistance team, the team may recommend the termination of administrator's contract, appointment of an interim superintendent (when more than half of schools in a district are low-performing) and/or suspension of powers and duties of the local board of education. The State Board may further recommend the dismissal of any principal when the Board receives from the assistance team two consecutive evaluations that include written findings and recommendations regarding the principal's inadequate performance.

Optional transfer of students: If a school in Florida fails to improve its grade of "F" under the state system of accountability for two out of four consecutive years, students in the school are able to attend any public school that scored a "C" or better in the county or an adjacent county or an eligible private school using an "opportunity scholarship," commonly known as a voucher.

In addition to these and other sanctions, states have also set up systems in which local schools and districts can lose governing control of the school or be closed altogether. These sanctions might be considered the final, ultimate layer of accountability.

School Takeover, Reconstitution or Closure: The Ultimate Layer

Twenty-three states have enacted policies that allow them to take over a school district due to academic problems within the district, while nineteen states have enacted policies that allow them to reconstitute schools (Ziebarth, 2000). In Colorado, for example, if a school that has been graded as an "F" fails to improve after two years, the school can be chartered as an independent school. Although there is considerable state involvement in the process, the charter is ultimately negotiated between the local board and the independent charter. Other examples include Maryland, a state in which the Board of Education has the authority to reconstitute failing schools, and recently assigned the management of three elementary schools to a private provider. In Texas a school that fails to improve may also be ordered to close. This is by far the most severe and controversial sanction available to states as a way to address the needs of chronically low performing schools and districts that seem incapable of improving their performance. The effectiveness of such sanctions is the topic of fierce public debate and should be further explored by the policy research community as it is employed in more and more schools and districts.

America's Reform Inferno: Where do the Layers Leave the Schools?

Each state has taken from some or all of these layers to build its system of accountability. While some have chosen, often for reasons of political feasibility, to hold schools accountable for results simply by reporting school and district assessment scores to the public, others have worked to provide assistance, distribute rewards, and levy sanctions on schools as performance incentives. A significant portion of the states have even determined that the best way to improve teaching and learning for students is to either assume control of a school, change its leadership and faculty or close the school altogether. But where do these systems leave schools that continue to struggle in their efforts to improve student achievement?

Some, like President George W. Bush, have argued that we must stay the course and continue to hold students and schools to the highest standards. Others, like the advocates at FairTest, have sought to force a mid-course change in the way standards-based reform in being implemented in many states across the country. In either case, it appears that the nation's schools will be left to use what limited resources they have from state assistance programs, federal dollars and locally-developed funding to improve assessment scores to their best of their ability; it seems America's reform inferno will remain the hot topic in education for the foreseeable future.

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